

Shopping



Two women examining second-hand clothes at a street market in Mile End just after the war.

After the cinema I had to shop what seemed like all afternoon with Mum. I'd stand on my own in various queues – grocer, greengrocer, butcher, loose tea shops – always with a note but no money in my hand.

How Mum timed her return to the second without owning a watch I will never know, but she always got there just in the nick of time to pay.

Although some middle-class households had food delivered, shopping for food and everyday necessities was done on foot or by bus by almost everybody else. Shops were open five and a half days a week, with one local ‘half day closing’ each week. Saturday was the big day, and Sunday opening was illegal except for corner shops that sold newspapers and cigarettes. And you could get virtually everything you needed in the local High Street. Let’s begin by looking at one, described by a man born in 1922.

At the back of us was Bethnal Green Rd – The Road. Let me take you on a walk down it. Outside the Cornwallis pub my mate’s Dad stood selling beetroots for a penny. He cooked them in an old washing tub at his home. Opposite him was a fruit stall, whose owner kept his spare fruit in boxes behind it. If he saw one of us go near them and bend down he’d rush round, so we made a stick with a nail in the end so we could pick up an apple or orange without bending down. The next stall along was a classic, a man who made all sorts of sweets. He would put the ingredients into a large copper bowl at the back with a fire burning under it. When the mixture was ready he’d scoop it out and knead it onto a hook he had fixed on the stall, roll it onto a marble slab and cut it into sweet pieces. The smell was ecstasy for us.

Then there was a run of butchers, fruit and veg, and toy stalls up to the café, whose owner made a beautiful iced slab cake which he cut into squares, letting us kids have the crusty corner pieces for a halfpenny a bag. Then there was the pork butcher’s shop. He sold hot saveloys and pease pudding. I tried to snatch a sausage once but they all came out in a long string and I had to let go and run for it. Near the end of the road a man sold hot baked jacket potatoes and chestnuts. If one got too burnt he’d let us have it, so we used to hover there in hope.

Saturday mornings were spent shopping with my mother in Stoke Newington. With supermarkets unheard of, we traipsed from shop to shop with our paper carrier bags getting heavier as the day went on. First it was to the small Sainsbury’s, buying butter at one counter – with the white coated assistant using wooden paddles to carve it out of a large lump, eggs at another, sugar at another and so on. Then on to the butcher’s, where the cashier sat in a small wooden booth with customers’ money coming in from the different counters in cylinders on an overhead hydraulic system, and finally the greengrocer’s. Lunch was usually at Joe Lyons with its arty posters on the walls and ready-cooked meals on hot plates ‘hidden’ behind rows of metal doors. You had to lift the flaps to see what congealing concoctions lay behind them, like getting a prize from a bran tub.

We bought blocks of ice from the fishmonger’s in the summer as we didn’t have a fridge. Hardly anyone did.

The yard also contained a cupboard with wire mesh in the door for ventilation, called the safe. It was the nearest to a fridge that they could afford and during the winter it kept the food cool. In the summer you just went shopping every day to the corner shop for stuff that could go off. Milk bottles were kept standing in cold water to keep cool.